

Lord of My Heart

Shannon Grand

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Zoo Tycoon 2

We built our labyrinths: Oryx and camels
chewed their cud at the zoo entrance,
peafowl scratching in the leaves in the next
exhibit. On one side of the zoo guests
glimpsed the sky-striped flanks

of okapis and the jaguar's eye-speckled
coat. Down the other side they crossed
above hippos half-submerged in swamp
green pixels and flocks of squawking
flamingos programmed to lift their legs

every ninety seconds. We placed the rare
red pandas and snow leopards at the back
to draw them in. We christened the animals
with the names of our classmates:
Kevin Hodge was the elephant, Danielle

the ostrich. Other times we chose
the names of book characters, celebrities,
supermarket chains, or countries. The game
announced: *Paris Hilton has given birth to*
Reticulated Giraffe 3. And once our zoo

hit five stars – or sometimes at one star,
or none – we built a brick wall
around the entrance and bulldozed
the other fences, watching the slow
recognition of the loud flowing herds

dawn on the blocky cats. They choppily
stalked the crowd (shouting in unison
the same syllable of panic) and tossed
the occasional man into the air until,
increasingly angry, they turned on each other

and our message box filled with death
notifications: *Bengal Tiger 14 has killed*
Bengal Tiger 3. Bored, we panned across
the map and found only the same fights, and
the occasional guest who'd slid in neutral

standing position down a cliff and glitched
at the zoo edge, hover-walking in midair
just above the fence, but going nowhere.
Walking, they got hungry, tired, thirsty – but
their notifications were lost among the others.

Cells

The paper wasps are up before me
today, armored legs already quick

in their sockets when I approach
the sink. My tinny phone speaker hums

and buzzes as I microwave oatmeal,
Marco Solís in his pink silk jacket

singing about a breakup. He dissolves
and reappears on the screen mid dance step

with an electric guitar in front of a projection
of himself, smiling. Through the window

the wasps have clustered. They clump
on the left half of the nest, feeding

or mating. I turn at the microwave's chime,
accompanying the first notes of "Tu cárcel."

Children of *bher*-

My dad hangs up as my grandmother tries to tell him she loves him,
then says he wouldn't have had kids if he'd known, then takes

it back. They've been talking about my sister again. My grandmother
says it's just a matter of living with the pain. She knows all

the children of *bher*:- *suffer* the twin sister of *fortune*, who both love
her equally, *metaphor*, *furtive*, *birth*, and *fertile*; *euphoria*, *ferret*,

forbear, and *fortuitous*. My dad does not believe her, knowing *fortune*
disproportionately well. I was born blue and hungry for oxygen,

which they had to pump into me before I could balloon euphoric
and screaming. Being alive is climbing down the parking garage stairs

watching the water tower and trees stretch up closer every time you reach
the window, then spread away until you're standing on the bottom floor

alone in a fluorescent concrete chamber, dwarfed by shadowy pillars. In this way
burden sneaks into the joints, another child: she has been in your blood

the whole time. Is it *fortuitous* that my sister takes after my grandmother
and I don't? Why is birth so furtive? The verb *forbear* (refrain, resist, endure)

they know well. My dad likes to talk about forbearance when he tells
the story of his sacrifice and hard work, which ends retired at fifty

in good health set to inherit half as much again as he's made. *Forbearer*
is the child of this verb with the unrelated noun *forbear*, from fore + be-er,

one who is before, and has the same meaning as both: one who has carried
and endured before. It hurts my sister to hug. She will not get married,

though she may have children. I may do the opposite. Neither of us has told
him this. Another child, *paraphernalia*: "something brought by a bride."

Five Coins

for jumping on the small monsters' heads, ten for the medium, fifteen for the giants throwing little fruit bombs. The boss watches from his tower as you collect. Your stupid sidekicks keep getting themselves killed, so you push them off stuff just to hear them scream. Loyal beyond the last, they always reappear blinking somewhere you don't want them, probably cause your death. And dying's the worst. Watching your body beneath the twisting spikes, impaled bloodlessly revolution after revolution, you swing your mouse in circles watching your face merge with the wall. The loading bar stalling. Your sidekicks gone by now (who knows where). When you finally get back up and running, you like to bump the NPCs; sometimes they say, "Please stop that," others, "I think I'm lost." In later editions they'll even fight you.

With My Brother

My grandmother plumps his pasta
with her hands, spaghetti strangling
her fingers, then she slaps the table.

It's good for you, she says, popping
a fleshy piece of chicken into her mouth
with basil-spotted hands. *You'll feel better*

if you just eat. He rests his chin on his knees
and stares at the colorless fiber stuck
between her teeth, hands clenching his ankles.

Country

They troop in from shooting,
brandish the paper targets

my dad bought at Walmart
on Black Friday along with

the guns. *Don't forget to wash
the lead off your hands*, he says.

Eze-Scorer BC Bad Guy's
perforated face stares up at me

in multiples from the table,
guns still cocked, mouths open wide.

Cotillion

The chaperones have been instructed
to make the boys take the drinks for both
themselves and the girls. They sip
their Sprite and kick their legs,
avoiding eye

contact with anyone: Miss Linda,
with some comment on how to hold
the clear plastic cups; the girls
on either side who've been told
to sit knees closed

and don't; their parents circulating
with pastel trays and small trash bins.
One girl smiles and looks at her stiletto
ankle booties, waiting for the girl two
seats down to tell

her she's not supposed to wear heels
or boots. That girl looks like she's ready
for a funeral. Her cardigan buttons
at the neck. Someone describes the boy
they almost had

to dance with. Miss Linda starts the coat
lesson: everyone stands; the young women
offer to take the young men's coats, reach
their hands over the boys' shoulders
from behind,

fumble at the chest for the lapels, and peel
back the black fabric until it slides free.
The boys thank them and take their coats.
At 9 o'clock they line up to shake hands
with Miss Linda

and the dance instructors, first him, then her,
then Miss Linda. One boy makes a finger
gun and winks on his way out. Others
say *good evening* or wait for a prompt,
mouth open,

hand nerveless all the way down the row.

The chaperones pile the circle of chairs
in six stacks of ten, in a rectangle
three chairs by two, tucked in the closet,
as Miss Linda likes.

Citizens

We get distracted looking up
pictures of Thom Tillis's wife
and I worry you think *repre*
and *sentative* are two words.

Senator, I say, and you say *four*
hundred thirty-five. When we
looked up "The Star-Spangled
Banner" on my phone I had to

x out of the window where
a man made a sphere of matches
then watched it burn. It was nine
minutes long. Big green sphere

slowly flaring into black and
you can list every national
holiday, number the Supreme
Court justices, give the name

of one Native American tribe
which is all you need to know.
I do not know the name of
my Cherokee great-great

grandmother, nor my Jewish
great-grandfather on the other
side, nor the aunt who wanted
to frame the old titles from when

they'd had slaves. One afternoon
my dad spills salt everywhere
and his mom calls him Uncle
Joe, who I've never heard of. Not

that I ever paid attention to names
at those few reunions, or on
the first day of class, or meeting
you. The later regret for not

holding you right between
my teeth, your name unsure
like the few Yiddish words
I know, which I had thought

were English for years. Once
my dad found out his best
friend was his cousin. I study
a language my ancestors never

spoke. Whenever someone is
sick my dad says they are better
off than Aunt Goldy; the only thing
I know about her is that she's dead.

In the Garden

The whole of our world finally almost named,
some parent calling for us, the only thing left

to name ourselves. Onomatopoeia: coiner

of names. I was the best at it, summoning
villains through ear-bending incantations we

alone could repeat, and which we practiced
grunting and shrieking. And the good guys,
too: anakallins, dragons, hummingcats,

monkeys, macaws. My own name required
more thought than the animals' so as not

to repeat my parents' mistakes: initials like

a slug, the flat vowels. I preferred rounder
names, *natural* names: Laurel, Aura, really

anything different from what I had. And yet
evening came. Interrupted my adoption of my
self; the continual returning inside to our given

names, our received names. Evening, from Old
English *ǣfen*. Or else borrowed from Latin

Ēva, *Hēva*, from Hebrew *ḥawwâ*: living, life.

Role Play

I sat in front of the class with a boy
I didn't know while Coach M. read
the story from his teaching guide.
We'd drawn the *main characters'*
names out of the hat: Mary and

Josh, in love, having sex. Turns out
Mary hadn't just had sex with one
person because Lindsay had slept
with Josh, too. And with Simon.
Each one moving up to the front

as their character's name was called:
Joe, Marissa, Jane, Jonathan, all
sitting in the tree together. Mary was
a paper towel, said Coach M. I
was a paper towel, said Coach M.

Bathroom Rituals

My dad steps out of the shower
in a cloud of the pomegranate
body wash he bought after using
mine. Still buttoning his shirt,
he strides out to the woods with
his dog; the men need to pee.

Being Good

I

I did confirmation that year because
everybody did it in middle school

my few church friends had done it
the year before but my sister did it

in eighth grade so I waited and then
I felt more alone. They gave out all

the mentors and I didn't know who
mine was my mom pointed I looked.

II

Every week we ate Publix sandwiches talked about stuff that made
us *hmm* and nod like *the Devil likes to get you on your own or it really
all comes back to Jesus*. I floated through those Sunday afternoons
bobbing my head at those right answers we both really already
knew and told my mom after *it was good*. They said to dress nice
for that Sunday and I worried about it mostly had cargo shorts
cotton yoga-ish sweatpants asked my mom she said it was okay.
My life on the line somehow because of all this.

III

I always liked to be on my own. Didn't like my dad to be
in my bed either: the smell of his cologne left wherever

he sat. My mentor I couldn't tell her stuff she said *how
are you* I said *good* every time even when those boys

at school started up. Once or twice we met in a church
classroom just us and posters with primary colored fruit

of the spirit and bright anthropomorphic armor smiling
at us over top of elementary white fonts. Other times

outside I remember the sun on the kickball field and
the book of Mark which they chose because it was short.

IV

My sister was always threatening
to cut off my hair it made me
nervous. Hair down to my hips

mostly ponytail that was also
braided but I let it out if I thought
I had to look nice. When we

were younger she painted these
wooden cutouts just sitting
around they were trees. I was

bored they were in a box
I drew faces on them; one was
purple with an apron another

the mother but I've forgotten
what it looked like. She said
the purple one was her favorite

before I ruined it and I ruined
all of them and she would cut off
my hair and I said *sorry* and she

said *no more Track 14* which is
to say this song my mom burned
onto a CD about the moon and a

lonely man and the lonely women
that would stay in his house. I
imagined a silver room full

of sleeping bags. I never really
listened to song lyrics but I got
that much and my sister said

it reminded her of Nanny which
was impossible because she
died when my sister was three

but she hated it and we argued
in the basement and I cried like
always. Afraid of punishment

even when it was my sister
who couldn't enforce what she
threatened even the haircut.

V

Confirmation Sunday I wore my black cotton yoga-ish
sweatpants and purple shirt that at least
was fitted no prints and my sister said *are you wearing*

that. I said *yes* she said *it looks horrible* she was probably
right then my dad said I had to change
into something nicer and I didn't have anything
and my mom had said it was fine

and I cried and my mentor hadn't read my statement before.
It was short I hadn't
asked her to read it, I'd said

it was good, but I was crying now. Blaming it on
hormones it was always my body's fault. I wore
the sweatpants cried through
the first half of the service finally stopped

in time and stood up front while
we went down the line, everyone thanking
their mentor for helping them so
much they just loved them so much. My mentor
nodding her head. She would tell

me *short and sweet* after, *short and sweet*
when they were all congratulating me. I hated
being congratulated all I ever did was exceed

expectations which was meet
expectations really. My grandparents

they were there all the way from Tennessee. That
was the year Emma Strickland
at lunch talked about kissing girls
being so much better because they weren't

slobbery and wore lip gloss and I felt uncomfortable but mostly
because I had never kissed anyone and sometimes worried
if my still-absent period meant

I was a boy. I'd never liked
a boy before but not girls either

I didn't think and I didn't know what that
made me. At church we never talked about that
not even with my mentor not even

anything at all about kissing anyone
we were good Presbyterians my mentor and I lost
touch after Confirmation Sunday smiled
if we met at church but didn't
miss each other.

MASH

They're too old for it, but go
through with the ritual all
the same: elaborate volcano
deaths and suffocation by
cats, husband's names drawn
from creepy acquaintances,
celebrities. Laughs. The future
resolves itself. Permutations
of bizarre disaster. They hold
their breath for the crossing
out, spirals of probabilities.

March

The bus is stuck at the turn, food
rotting in the fridge, and the day
blue with brilliant gusting sun
and humming generators thrusting
stoplights into their eternal motion.
The buds determined to cling

to the bucking branches, each petal
skittering through the road testament
to the others' victory, as the swinging
powerlines sweep the rain-soft earth.

It used to be you'd see the eyes
of creatures under the curling slide.
Behind the quivering fence. Wherever
your friends pointed and you hoped
they'd appear, never quite sure if
you really saw them. Wanting to. How

when you stared up into the clear sky
you could make an invisible tunnel appear
there, pure something scintillating until
you blinked, and you wanted it to stay
but your eyes, your eyes.

Where have
the tunnels gone? A car swishes
past, in the passenger seat a girl
whose mouth hangs open. *The whole
creation has been groaning as in the pains
of childbirth.* On the trampoline you
were always almost flying. One day
you stepped onto the shaking fabric
and it took the breath right out of

your feet and you were falling
after that, falling. And the smell
of your mom's garden familiar
but the names were gone, the names
she always used to tell you, this
one was sage, this one was thyme,

did she even have thyme. You used
to play orphans and this plant was
where you'd hide from the adults
marching past. Where the eyes
would appear. You knew that
if you saw the eyes, you'd
know who they belonged to.

At the Nutcracker

The Arabian Queen rises
like ribbons of steam
from her rich cup

of coffee, descends
sensuously the sugar
steps set out for her

by two palm frond fan
bearing page boys.
We watch enchanted

by those snake-
charmer arms, emerald
gem centered on her

forehead, watch like
the king as she rolls
on the floor. We're here

for the gymnastics: the flip,
back bend, belly dancer veiling
her face. We could never hope

to look like her. And
what about sixteen-
year-old me? Seated

on the shoulder of a man
perhaps twenty-five years
my senior. Slipping off

wrong every time, unable to tell
anyone if I was nervous. Unable
to tell, myself. I tried not to look

him in the eyes. My skirt
showering metallic through
steps I did without the hip

rotations, yoga prayer arms
 rising over my head and
 open. My ribcage shows

in the photos. In the theater
 the Arabian Queen performs
 the *arabesque penchée* (I

am no longer flexible
 enough to), finishes with
 a seductive namaste bow,

blonde ponytail over her
 shoulder. They always
 bow like that. Every year

since I was two, suspended
 in the dark as she glowed,
 bowed. And me, attempting

it, too; we didn't think
 too much about who
 we represented.

But there is no going
 back anymore. Instructors
 would tell me to be

myself, or rather, not
 myself, not looking
 at my lap while talking,

not thinking too hard
 about how I looked,
 not looking so much

at the body I could not
 get to do things I did
 not know I wanted

it to do. I watch this
 one casting the spell
 I couldn't and it still

works, in spite of who
 we've become. I used
 to worry that my double

outperformed me;
 my sister said we
 simply had different

takes: her queen
 the prostitute, and
 mine the slave.

Diagrams

"New Research Says
the Y-Chromosome
in Danger of Disappearing," on the news

today. My thigh hair is sparse
and sporadic
as the hair on a fat
balding man's head. The sky
a half-

digitized cross section
of torn and fragmentary fabric. Trees
haloed.

I hold my sweatshirt drawstrings
between my lips drawn

over my teeth. One winter
I woke up
to spring
climbing the trellis of my bones and then
it felt wrong

to wear shorts. My own
name
made my mouth

nervous. Too
nasalized. I dreaded mispronouncing
it almost as much as asking

my mom for help when I itched
down there.

We misdiagnosed it
because I didn't know
the right names: those
illustrations
I'd known we weren't supposed to look

too closely at
in middle
school biology, and to which
we never returned.
The sun leaves behind a ribbed sheet
of coral skin
shredded over the sky's
blue organs.

Stopping in to say hello

He is the kind, patient parent
when my sister hits him. The
trace of finger-oils left behind
on the objects on her dresser,
nothing she really intends to
hide. But she has told him
how much his rifling gets her.
That angry sign on her door.

Confessions

The electronic signature invents
my handwriting and today
I cried in a movie

theater every time the volume
rose too high, during the previews
especially. Failure

slips in with the cold like a sin
and I renew the contract, spend
another morning lying

on the floor tugging on
my hair. I have never tried
to grow a beard.

Somewhere outside, arsenic
trees are growing out of old
cell phones and

I fall asleep again, never sure
if it's just hunger. Wake up
with a sore throat.

A professor puts his hand
on mine to stop my fidgeting,
he says; I haven't cried

in front of him yet. I touch
my mouth too often. I sleep
to stop myself

once I've started crying and
when I lie on my back my
forehead turns cold.

Annotation

You will find, if you look
carefully into any human's
heart, that he is haunted
by at least two imaginary
women. Men like to tell me
they like my eyes. One asks
if anyone's ever called me
beautiful before. One texts
I've never been a romantic
antagonist before. One
knows I'm long-distance, asks
about him every time I see
him. The terrestrial
Venus: his desire is readily
obedient to marriage, colored
all through with that
golden light of reverence
and naturalness. They watch
me in the mirror during
the waltz lesson. *Can you*
send me a picture of your
Catwoman cosplay? on
Halloween. I know what
my body looks like.
Another type which he
desires brutally, and desires
to desire brutally. The real
use of the infernal Venus is,
no doubt, as a prostitute
or mistress. One man envisions
me writing a poem about him.
Another regrets not stealing
a kiss from me the day we met.

Capture

The camera turns the room into blurring shadows. The cats thump in the dark and laughter surprises them into a rain of fading footsteps. Another video deleted. They face each moment as if surprised to not remember how it compares to the last. The one cat wraps herself in her tail, the other searching the apartment all evening. She turns from each object after it breaks.

Profile

My mom always said my sister
fought tigers in her sleep. Punched

her waking up one morning. We named

that dream the Voldemort Dream;
my sister ready
to protect herself (and
me), always more than ready. She told

me about her self-defense class at the public
library and how no one but her would

shout. I thought about the gap inside me
every time I'd been called upon
to project,
hoped the shape of a scream was there
somewhere for those emergency moments

I was always imagining. *Do you like
to eat in silence?* someone asked me

over dinner. I was raped in a dream
once, didn't remember

fighting when
I woke up. I know I exaggerate

the gravity of everything. But that didn't
stop me

from looking over my shoulder
on the way home after a guy I kind of

knew told me I was like a drug to him.
Even though I didn't really think in-

person him could do the things Internet
him seemed capable of.

The Lake

My dad goes back in Febr
his wetsuit.
home blue-fingered, would
to leave his
there if he'd given
man's man.

Nomenclature

One of those words you know but never hear surprises you by having a shape in your ears: *eponymous*. You never shared a name with a classmate. Up the screen

flows the wedding album of someone you don't know. You know their name. How many times did you correct your classmates' pronunciation in your head

when they read aloud? Denomination, binomial, patronymic, how could they not know. And now the stars with their pseudonyms *epic slow-mo moments*

from the red carpet captured by the Galaxy s9 robins outside in the yard like sentries and the grass in a neon square, and a triangle. A news story

about anomia set to come on at eleven.

That's not exactly how it happened

He was more polite than
I made it seem. Knew
to open the door for me.

Did I really say outright
I wasn't interested? Those
couple of times we hung

out, just us; I paid but
he could have thought
I wanted to. He really did

care, it's true. His hand
hovering over a wallet
under the table, his hand

hovering behind my blind
back. And still. What
do I make of my body?

Self-consciousness

My cousins can't take the silence
in the car; they turn on Allan
Sherman's album with the song
about the big Jewish family and
my dad sings the part with
the fast names. Sings over
the stretched road silence still
wrapped around my throat, over
my heartbeat like bike pedals
in my ears, over the noiseless air
vents. I like my cat because
she lands from her jumps looking
over her shoulder for who saw.
But still jumps, feet splayed,
misses wildly almost every time.

The Flag

Not a corner to touch
the ground. The five
rows of eyes sharpen
the folds from their
place at attention; one
uniformed young man
focuses the iPhone lens.

And none of it was how I said it was

My dad doesn't actually
believe we'd be better
off bombing the Middle

East out of existence. He
likes to sit on the porch
with a beer and my mom

and the land he has made
his own. And his dog.
Banging on the ceiling

with her cane to quiet
down the neighbors,
my sister tells me about

the walker she decorates
according to the season
for when she needs to ram

her way through a crowd.
My mom doesn't like
her to tell the relatives

about the walker. But I tell
my grandmother my sister's
doing better every time

I see her, because, I guess,
of the walker story. She's
always saying *that girl*

needs a break. And my sister
really does threaten my dad
with her cane. With tampons, too.

Language Arts

*Guys, admit it, you've all checked
a girl out before, my teacher said.
Raise your hands, she said. One red
boy would not, stammered something
about Jesus when they all laughed.*

Lord of My Heart

Switzer to midfield and he was met violently by the caption
frozen over high-definition pepperoni pizza. My sister rising

with the help of her cane to announce she'd better be getting
home. My parents asking, *already?* Outside the okra reaches

its knobby chapping fingers out of the dirt. *You are holistically*
fallen, my pastor preached one time, meaning the body, too.

We sang "Be Thou My Vision" that day. My dog is having
nightmares. We spent the morning lying in the grass, just me

and him; he watched for my dad's car returning from downtown
while I listened to the trees swell like water. A crow called

at a hawk. There were things I was supposed to be
doing. Was God there with us? When my sister arrived

she talked about Viagra and the old, white men she'd never met
that she despised. She told me once she thought that sitting normal

in a chair was uncomfortable. I do too. She said something about autism.
I was thinking about three weeks of yellow pills, one week of brown

ones. *Naught be all else to me / save that Thou art.* On the TV
a woman's skin practically glows. Neither of us enjoys

kissing. My dad doesn't believe in mental illness. My pastor
preached that suicide is the ultimate form of self-pity. Once

a month I pour blood out of a cup and flush it down the sink,
thick as mucus. My dog growls at me in his sleep.

Resurrection

Rainwater collects on the green tarp
over the concrete basin of the empty pool,
and spotted leaves float like children's bodies
playing dead face down on a July afternoon,
convinced that when they lift their red faces
to the blinding oxygen and turquoise chatter,
their friends will all have given up first
and will be waiting expectantly for them,
the last wrinkled child bursting triumphant
again out of the silence. In November
their gulp and splash of relief is imaginary.
My fingers, rasping against each other as I breathe
on them, remain the same fingers from which
I used to suck Cheeto-rime, the same fingers
that pinched ants from my hairless legs,
wiped the jumbled paste of their body parts
onto the concrete. We'd invent games
inspired by them, us black ants marching
on one side of the pool chanting threats
of dismemberment to the red ones patrolling
across from us. With these fingers too
we captured invaders, cleaned our own knees
turned to shredded paper, splashed
our unsuspecting sunscreen-smelling mothers
reading Southern Living as they tanned.
And then we'd dive back under.

I was baptized twice and so will be
my future children: once dipped backwards
holding their nose in the applauding vault
of a service, once engulfed in chlorine
wearing leaky goggles, grasping
at a Styrofoam noodle that has fired
into the air. They will resurface
lungs aching in the tub coughing
out water, crown of frothy white
L'Oréal Kids shampoo on their heads,
pink veil of sunburn across their cheeks.
They'll lift their fingers from beneath
the foam counting over and over hoping
to reach ten again. At ten they will stand
midwaist, spin with their arms out shouting

hurricane!, blunder into foam rafts
to sink them and use the rafts to pin
each other gurgling and desperate
underwater. A few years later
they'll remove bristly hairs
from their chin for the first time, boys
mowing with a steel blade,
girls yanking by the root, ripping
the black hairs from their sockets
one by one, with the bathroom door
closed. Each morning they will wake
to the familiar prickle of a body
outpacing them, surging incomprehensibly
forth, thick and stubborn, through the night.
The hairs will collect in the sink bowl
damp and scattered like leaves
and like mornings. Days like this one,
they'll come home and drive
their numb fingers up the coast
of their sister's salt dough America,
tell me in this way how school was,
tell me it was fine. Face riddled
with small red anthills, they'll wish
they could curl in their mother-smelling beds,
covers overhead, waiting for November
to cede to December to cede to January
and until July – to sleep until no one
remembers them, to not wake up.

Yet still they'll wake, write their way
through to morning, phone flashlight
propped on the pillow. In my books
I had the body of an animal,
or no body at all; I could turn invisible,
did not need friends. My protagonists
lost their mothers on the first page. I hid
my old illustrations: cats in Crayola Aqua Green
and Cerulean with names like Firestar
or Fred Baird, the enormous Orbit
Un-Spinner Dragon, ants in Rose Art Red
and Black that bled Paper Mate pen.
We had enacted these drawings:
my sister the hungry river sediphin that lived
in the driveway judging the flower crowns

of us worker monkeys, smudging
the uncreative ones into the cement.
All of it I stacked on a shelf under a blanket
and a pillow in the back of my closet
with another pillow in front. Some evenings
it was dark before I'd gotten home. Some
evenings I was crying before I'd gotten home.
I evaded after-school practice with false
stomach-aches, listened to the crackle
and thump of my mom downstairs cooking dinner,
the irregular heartbeat of the knife. I tried
not to think about the tampons I carried
but had never needed, the years that added
and added up and still dry, my fingers
tracing on the white skin of my stomach
a worried picture of organs. I stayed in
for Halloween that year pretending
to do homework, while outside children laughed
and our jack-o-lanterns grinned back.

We'd always hoped the guts would splatter
in the trees when the pumpkin mouths
started to sag over their blackened cavities
and we hurled them over the back porch balcony
into the woods. Those woods the ones
where, on summer afternoons, we scrambled red
with mud up the steep soft creek bank,
gouging the clay with our feet
and our fingers. Falling to our knees
with a splash on the algae-slimed rocks
below in prayer position, faces sunken
into the mud, we stood again and again
hoping to crest the bank this time.
In that creek my neighbor struck
my sister with a branch playing
horse tamer; afterwards my sister buried
herself in dirty towels on the floor
of the linen closet, just small enough
to fit beneath the low first shelf. Years
later a boy would ask her to a dance
as a joke and she would come home,
wrap herself in the same position on her bed
with the door locked. When she opened
for our mother I saw that the water

had streaked her face red. Only after
so many years that we no longer cared
did she tell me about it, thinking our mother
had already told me. I, too, confessed
that at fourteen two boys always stood
behind my chair in class complimenting
my cargo shorts and utilitarian braid, the same
class in which I'd felt a release one day
and my own warm urine puddled
beneath my chair. It would cool
in the nurse's office as I called home.

My blood cooled in each of the vials
as the doctor filled the last one, explained
the contraceptive's act of fertility,
the sugar pills and my withdrawal
bleeding performance. The risk,
should it prove positive, of diabetes.
My mother did not believe in her.
We watched the Weather Channel
religiously, red and blue air like veins
knotted across the map, dividing
it like our old pool territories. She believed
in that map, believed in me. The house
grew heavy around us. And then the wind
shuttled past, carried nothing away
that time. We opened our eyes in the dark
morning hearing silence, not knowing
when we'd slumped into sleep, and climbed
into the day. One day we will do so

for the last time. Or so we tell ourselves.
We look for each other in the floodwaters,
find a seething ark of fire ants drifting
also seeking land, turn them away.
The walls are watermarked with the name
of the God of Sodom and Gomorrah.
We rebuild again, count ourselves.
Pray. In the water there are swollen
pulpous Cheetos, long, pale, and yellow
like fingers. I pray the sun into existence
and my sons and daughters and the hairs
on our faces too. Pray to Clomid, Metformin,
Provera. To the God of Sarah. To the waters

always ready to receive me, the waters
that do not want to give me back.
I believe they will give me back.

Notes

Etymological information in “Children of *bher-*” and “In the Garden” comes from the American Heritage Dictionary Indo-European and Semitic Roots Appendices. The root *bher-* in this manuscript refers to the first definition, *bher*⁻¹: “To carry; also to bear children,” and not *bher*⁻²: “Bright, brown.”

Italicized language in “March” comes from Romans 8:22.

“Annotation” borrows text from C.S. Lewis’s book *The Screwtape Letters*.

“Lord of My Heart” uses verses from the hymn “Be Thou My Vision.”